DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 288 344 EC 201 225

AUTHOR Luckner, John L.
TITLE Enhancing Self-Esteem of Special Needs Students.
PUB DATE Apr 87
NOTE 30p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Council for Exceptional Children (65th, Chicago, IL, April 20-24, 1987).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Guides - Classroom Use - Materials (For Learner) (051)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adventure Education; Educational Methods; Elementary Secondary Education; Outdoor Activities; *Outdoor Education; Problem Solving; Risk; Self Concept; *Self Esteem; Special Education; Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS *Special Needs Students

ABSTRACT

The paper explains why outdoor adventure education programs have been successful in enhancing the self-esteem of special needs students. Such an approach features physically or psychologically demanding outdoor pursuits to provide meaningful challenges through self-discovery and personal growth. Ways in which the program fosters five prerequisites for self-esteem (connection, uniqueness, power, models, and accomplishment) are considered. Based on the success of the outdoor adventure education process, six classroom adaptations are suggested: creating situations that promote disequilibrium, providing experiences using cooperative learning procedures, establishing a peer tutoring program, teaching students specific problem-solving strategies, providing direct instruction in social interaction skills, and providing opportunities for group discussion. (CL)

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ENHANCING SELF-ESTEEM OF SPECIAL NEEDS STUDENTS

John L. Luckner, Ed.D.
Department of Special Education
State University of New York at Geneseo
Geneseo, New York 14454

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Paper presented at the 65th Annual Council for Exceptional Children. April 20-24, 1987

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Abstract

Educators and psychologists generally agree that positive feelings of self-esteem are essential for students and clients. This concern exists due to the effect that self-esteem has on levels of achievement, ability to adjust to the demands of the environment and general state of well being. The literature in the field of special education is replete with references to the less than adequate sense of self-worth that many special needs students possess. Contemporary research has indicated that outdoor-adventure education programs can have a significant positive effect on enhancing the self-esteem of course participants. This paper focuses on the factors that make outdoor-adventure education programs successful in promoting change. From these variables specific activities and expeiences that will help foster a positive sense of self for exceptional students while in their school environment are presented.

Self-esteem is a judgement about one's self-worth, one's competence and value, based upon the process of conceptualizing and gathering information about oneself and one's experiences (Johnson, 1979 p. 123). A substantial and growing body of empirical evidence (Beane et al., 1980; Burns, 1979; Hansford & Hattie, 1982; Purkey, 1970) suggests the significance of positive self-perceptions to personal development. Educational programs for special needs students are concerned with promoting self-esteem for a variety of reasons, which include psychological health and achievement in school and in postschool endeavors. Most studies that have investigated the self-esteem of exceptional students (e.g., Griffiths, 1975; Ringness, 1961; Rosenthal, 1973; Schurr, et al., 1970)) have concluded that this group of individuals has a more negative self-perception than their peers receiving regular education services. The by-products of this negative self-attitude are often school failure and behavioral problems (Smith et al., 1986).

The process of building self-esteem evolves and changes as a child develops and has new experiences. Understanding and meeting individual needs is an overt goal of all educational and psychological programs. Because we as educators play a major part in student's views of themselves, it is essential that we know ways to enrich these feelings of self-worth. But if educational programs

are being charged with improving the levels of self-esteem of their students, there is little to suggest that they are effectively meeting this responsibility. Among the many factors contributing to the problem is the paucity of practical information on the subject (Burbach, 1980). The purpose of this paper is to examine an intervention program that has been successful in enhancing self-esteem of program participants. Specific reasons for the success of this type of intervention will be delineated and educational practices that will foster a positive sense of self for special needs students will be discussed.

Outdoor-adventure education

One of the primary methods for enhancing self-esteem of individuals has been through the use of outdoor-adventure education. Outdoor-adventure education refers to learning programs in which outdoor pursuits that are physically or psychologically demanding are used within a framework of safety and skills development to provide meaningful challenges leading to increased satisfaction, personal, social, and environmental awareness (Bagby & Chavarria, 1980, p.1). The concept, variously referred to as adventure-based education, wilderness adventure programs, and environmental stress-challenge programs is an outgrowth of the Outward Bound School begun in 1941 by German educator

Kurt Hahn in Wales. Since its inception the Outward Bound program has spread to 17 countries on 5 continents (Bacon, 1983) with over 300 adaptive programs existing in the United States alone.

Outdoor-adventure education provides individuals an opportunity to learn from the natural environment. It is a method of teaching and an approach to learning that emphasizes hands-on, multi-sensory experiences. The structured program provides a set of experiences from which students can easily evaluate their individual selves and their relationship with others and nature. As course participants are placed in situations that require the behaviors of independence, responsibility, cooperation, and appropriate risk-taking, valuable new insights are gained. Through activities such as rock climbing, white-water canoeing, sailing, winter mountaineering, a ropes course, and group process, students come to recognize that they are capable of much more than they had previously thought. As these tangible experiences are internalized, reflected upon and shared, new conceptualizations, hypotheses, and generalizations are formed to try out in new settings.

Outdoor-adventure education is an educational vehicle for self discovery and personal growth. The program places an important emphasis on a cooperative rather than a competitive learning environment. Students are placed in

small groups, numbering anywhere from 7 to 12. Because of the group size, there is easy accessibility to the decision making process, and hence there is personal involvement and little sense of an arbitrary hierarchy. Simultaneously, the group is large enough to allow for a diversity of personality and behavior; yet, it is small enough to discourage the formation of cliques. The establishment and fulfillment of personal and group goals in outdoor physical activities, the group experience, and the opportunity to encounter and master stressful situations are important components of the program. Richards explains that the physical activities are an effective method for "the person to recognize and understand his own weaknesses, strengths, and resources and thus find within himself the wherewithal to master the difficult and unfamiliar" (1977, p.69). Research (e.g., Gaston, 1979; Gibson, 1981; Koepke, 1973; Luckner, 1985; Marsh, Richards & Barnes, 1986; Nye, 1976; Stremba, 1977; Vidolovitis-Moore, 1980; Winkie, 1977; Wright, 1982) has indicated that outdoor-adventure programming can have a significant positive effect on the self-esteem of its participants. The components of the outdoor-adventure education process are illustrated in the diagram found in the appendix.

Conditions of self-esteem:

A number of writers have proposed various factors as necessary for individuals to develop positive feelings of self-esteem. Drawing from the work of Coopersmith (1967) and Clemes and Bean (1980) the following five areas are presented as essential to develop and maintain a high level of self-esteem. It is positied that the effectiveness of the outdoor-adventure education process in promoting positive self-esteem within course participants is due to its ability to address each of these areas.

1. Connection - This results when children feel loved and cared for. When the student believes that what he or she thinks, says or does matters to others. And, that the people and things that are held in high regard by the child are also appreciated by others.

Having a sense of connection includes:

A) A feeling of being related to others. - Through the process of communication, shared feelings and warmth are exchanged between the student and others.

B) Being part of a team or an important member of a family, class or group.

C) Something important belongs to the child. - Attachment to places and things become important elements in a child's feelings.

D) People and things that the student feels connected to are important to others. - If the things that are important to a student are made fun of by others his own feelings of self-worth are affected.

E) The student's opinions are wanted and heard. - The child who knows his or her ideas are of interest to others will feel like a worthy person. Attention and respect for those ideas makes a child feel important.

2. Uniqueness - This occurs when a child knows that he or she is seperate and different from other people. And when the child receives respect and approval from others for those qualities.

Having a sense of uniqueness means:

A) To know that there is something special about oneself. - This is done in two ways. First, by helping students see that they have unique characteristics, skills and qualities. Second, by finding out what the child sees as unique about himself or herself and building on that through the use of

positive affirmations. (You did an excellent job on that model that you built, I really like your smile).

B) To know that others think that he or she is special. - This is learned by the way that significant others relate to the child.

C) To feel and know that he or she can do things that no one else can. - Due to the nature of the students that we work with, this may be limited to the student's style and approach toward doing things.

D) To have experiences that permit "differentness" to be expressed. - Excessive criticism and disapproval from significant others has a tendency to lead a child to have a negative self image.

E) Being able to develop one's creative potential. - Helping children feel special means that they are given opportunities to express themselves verbally, artistically, physically, and playfully.

3. Power - This comes from being given the opportunity to make choices and decisions, and being able to have some control over what happens in one's life.

Having a sense of power means:

A) To believe that one can do what one sets out to do. - The child needs to be given responsibility and the opportunity to make decisions and to profit from mistakes.

B) To feel that one is in charge of important things in one's life. - Children that are allowed to make decisions about things that are important to them develop self-confidence and a belief that they can do things independently.

C) Knowing how to make decisions and solve problems. - When others tend to solve problems for children or make decisions for them we are not giving the children the skills to be independent. We need to teach them effective ways of solving problems.

D) To feel comfortable when fulfilling responsibilities. - Students need to be provided with the appropriate amount of instruction, group review and guided practice in order to succeed with individual tasks.

E) To use skills that one has accumulated. - Once students have mastered specific skills they need opportunities to use them. Far too often students view the learning process as splintered parts rather than a cohesive whole. Building on previous learning and demonstrating the interrelatedness of

school subjects and real life experiences promotes feelings of interest and worth.

4. Models - This develops from being exposed to other individuals' personal values, goals and ideals.

Having a sense of models means:

A) To know people who are worthy models for one's own behavior. - Because modeling is unconscious, children learn more from example than from being told.

B) Knowing the standards by which one's performance will be evaluated. - Children are strongly motivated to please and gain approval from important adults, when standards are inconsistent they have difficulty making sense of rhyme or reason.

C) Having values and beliefs that are guides for his or her behavior. - Talking about values and goals are important. Helping children understand and express their values assists them in guiding their behavior.

D) Having a sense of order. - By living within a relatively ordered environment in which neatness, time commitments, and clear communication are practiced, a child develops skills in organizing, planning and effective problem solving.

5. Accomplishment - This comes from placing value on a task or goal and bringing it to the point of successful completion.

Having a sense of accomplishment includes:

A) Knowing how to establish goals and work toward them. - Working toward goals helps the child learn delayed gratification, emotional control, planning, problem solving and new skills. Reaching goals both short and long term helps students become confident in their own abilities.

B) Experiencing success on subject matter or activities that are of importance to the individual student. - If we want learners to feel they can succeed, we must help them to actually experience success. Merely telling learners they can succeed is not enough; admonishments of that sort wear thin after a few failures.

C) Having a broad range of experiences. - Every experience that a child has and the interpretation he or she makes of that experience influences the development of the child's feelings of importance. Promoting opportunities in which the student has diverse experiences to draw from can promote positive feelings. This in turn may encourage the child to develop a belief in his or her abilities and an expectation for success in future situations.

D) Knowing how to go about learning.- Learning how to learn is a result of a child organizing his or her curiousity. What is of value to the child is not necessarily of value to the adult and vice versa. Allowing the student to pursue the study of personal areas of interest that are internally motivating will facilitate a feedback loop that will perpetuate learning and positive feelings about oneself as a learner.

Classroom Considerations:

An individual's perception of self develops gradually and is a learned as one experiences life. Since it is learned it can be altered in direction and weighting as other learning experiences and interactions with significant others are encountered. Drawing from the success of the outdoor-adventure education process, the following classroom adaptations are suggested as viable methods and procedures for enhancing the self-esteem of exceptional students.

1. Create situations that promote forms of disequillibrium within students. - An important aspect of instruction is the degree to which disequillibrium can be fostered which creates conceptual conflict within students. This unrest increases their motivation to seek out new information and reorganize what they know (Johnson & Johnson, 1978). A

teacher can be instrumental in creating situations that create forms of disequillibrium in the students' thinking that will eventually lead to resolution and equilibrium. Studies by Inhelder (1971, 1972) suggest that educators can have an impact on a child's development when children's levels are carefully analyzed and programs for individual's are carefully designed with the disequillibrium principle in mind. More information on this topic can be found in Furth, (1981) and Wadsworth, (1978).

2. Provide educational experiences that use cooperative learning procedures. - A good deal of positive self-esteem is derived from peers. Cooperative learning is a systematic model for helping teachers implement and work with groups of students. Within this framework the educational goals of subject mastery, task completion, involvement of all group members, group problem solving with a minimum of teacher assistance and the development of social skills are stressed. Research on cooperative learning has indicated increased achievement levels and enhanced self-esteem when compared to individualistic and competitive learning (Johnson & Johnson, 1978; Slavin, 1981). The reader is referred to the following sources for more information on establishing cooperative learning environments: Dishon &

O'Leary, (1984); Johnson & Johnson, (1975); Schniedewind & Salend, (1987) and Slavin, (1983).

3. Establish a peer tutoring program. - A student's self-image and sense of worth can be increased through involvement in a peer tutoring program (Levine, 1986). Peer tutoring has many benefits for both special needs students and students who are acheiving adequately. Research (Devin-Sheehan, Feldman, & Allen 1979; Dineen, Clark, & Risley, 1977) indicates that those who tutor and those who receive tutoring gain from the learning situation. Within this process the student is assured undivided attention from another person and the chance to be heard at least once everyday. Providing opportunities for exceptional students to tutor younger children allows time to feel connected and promotes a sense of power. In addition, students may learn more about a topic by teaching it to someone else than they would if they were to learn it from a teacher or text (Maher, 1984). More specific information on peer tutoring can be acquired by consulting the following texts: Allen, (1976), Ehly and Larsen, (1980) and Haisley, Christine and Andrews, (1981).

4. Teach students specific problem solving strategies. - A growing body of research indicates that many exceptional students fail to use systematic or organized strategies for

solving problems (Havertape & Kass, 1978; McKinney & Haskins, 1980). In view of the fact that certain types of strategies are absolutely essential to school success, it is important for teachers to assess levels of proficiency on specific skills and provide remedial instruction. Implementing programs of study that provide comprehensive instruction in the development of specific problem solving strategies as well as the rules for applying these strategies to different kinds of problems is essential. Additional information on this topic is provided by Camp et al, (1977), Maker, (1981), and Spivack, Platt & Shure, (1976).

5. Provide direct instruction in social interaction skills. - Educational programs can contribute to a student's feelings of connection, power and accomplishment by offering them the opportunity to develop a larger repertoire of responses to social situations. The development of social interaction skills through the direct instruction techniques of modeling, guided practice, reinforcement and discussion can bring about important changes in the social competence and adjustment of exceptional students. Suggested resources for direct instruction techniques are: Jackson, Jackson, and Monroe, (1983), McGinnis & Goldstein, (1984), and Walker et al, (1983).

6. Provide opportunities for group discussion. - Educators and psychologistss have recently come to realize the great extent to which thought emerges as a social process and is internalized only after it has been socially expressed (Sternberg, 1987, p. 48). Planning opportunities and facilitating the interaction of students as they exchange points of view, personal feelings and individual goals is a highly beneficail educational procedure. Research (Durbin, 1982) indicates that participation in group discussion can significantly increase students' self-concepts. The ability to actively discuss topics of interest will aid students in their synthesis of information about learning and about themselves. A model for positive group discussion is covered in Hill, (1977) and Jones, Barnland & Haimen, (1980).

How people feel about themselves can have a pervasive effect on their lives. It can influence how an individual will do academically and socially. The relationship of affective and cognitive development is best understood as a mutually interactive process of ongoing reciprocal influences. Learning successes promote positive self-expectancies. Concomitantly, positive expectations and well-matched instructional opportunities sustain positive expectancies and foster further academic aspirations. Developing insight into student behavior and having

additional techniques to deal with it is often the key to a better learning climate, higher levels of academic achievement and enhanced self-esteem. Schools have the opportunity and responsibility to enhance the development of individuals beyond the acquisition of facts. Self-esteem and affective development are not the "soft" side of the curriculum they are a critical side.

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Appendix A

THE OUTDOOR - ADVENTURE EDUCATION PROCESS

I. THE STUDENT

experiences a state of

II. DISEQUILIBRIUM

which promotes the processes of:

a) assimilation
b) accommodation

by being placed in a

III. NOVEL SETTING

with the underlying conditions of:

a) hope
b) effort
c) trust
d) a constructive level of anxiety
e) a sense of the unknown or unpredictable
f) perception of risk

and

IV. A COOPERATIVE ENVIRONMENT

that includes the elements of:

a) group cohesiveness
    1) interpersonal communication
    2) shared goals
b) altruism
c) universality
d) imitative behavior - coping model

while being presented with:

V. UNIQUE PROBLEM SOLVING SITUATIONS

that are:

a) concrete

b) solveable
c) incremental
d) holistic - involving the cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains

that lead to:

VI. FEELINGS OF ACCOMPLISHMENT

that consist of:

a) enhanced self-esteem
b) an internal locus of control orientation

which are augmented by:

VII. PROCESSING THE EXPERIENCE

such as:

a) reflection
b) identifying, expressing and integrating thoughts, feelings and actions

which promotes

VIII. GENERALIZABILITY AND TRANSFER

utilizing the experience as a metaphor for:

a) personal growth and development
b) future endeavors